

# **A Letter From the Pope**

**Harry Harrison**

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**HARRY HARRISON and TOM SHIPPEY**

In the year 865, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a “great army” of the Vikings landed in England, led in legend and probably in fact by the sons of Ragnar Hairy-Breeks. In the following years this army wiped out the rival dynasties of Northumbria, killed Edmund, King of East Anglia, and drove Burgred, King of Mercia, overseas, replacing him with a puppet ruler. By 878 all the kingdoms of the English had been conquered — except for Wessex. In Wessex, Alfred, the last of five brothers, continued to fight.

But then the Vikings turned their full effort on him. At Twelfth Night 878, when all Christians were still getting over Christmas and when campaigning was normally out of the question, they made a surprise attack on Wessex, establishing a base at Chippenham, and according to the Chronicle again driving many Englishmen overseas and compelling others to submit. Alfred was forced to go into hiding and conduct a guerrilla campaign “with a small force, through the woods and the fastnesses of the fens”. It was at this time that — so the story goes — he was reduced to sheltering in a peasant’s hut where, immersed in his problems, he burned the good wife’s cakes and was violently rebuked for it.

Yet Alfred managed somehow to stay alive, keep on fighting, and arrange for the army of Wessex to be gathered under the Vikings’ noses. He then, quite against the odds, defeated the “great army” decisively, and finally made a masterstroke of statesmanship. He treated the Viking king Guthrum with great forbearance, converted him to Christianity, and became his godfather. This set up a reasonable relationship between English and Vikings, gave Wessex security, and became the basis for the later reconquest of all England by Alfred’s son, grandson and later descendants (of whom Queen Elizabeth II is one).

Many historians have noted that if Alfred had not held on in the winter of early 878, England would have become a Viking state, and the international language of the world would presumably now be a form of Danish. Yet another possibility.

By 878 Alfred and Wessex stood for Christianity, and the Vikings for paganism. The later reconquest of England was for Christ as well as for the Wessex kings, and monastic chroniclers were liable to see Alfred as an early crusader. But we know, from his own words, that by 878 Alfred was already deeply dissatisfied with the ineptitude of his churchmen. We also know that about the same time Ethelred, Archbishop of Canterbury, had written to the pope to protest about

Alfred's extortions — which were very likely only a demand for further contributions to resist the pagan assaults. Pope John responded by sending Alfred a letter of severe reproof — at exactly the moment when Alfred was “journeying in difficulties through the woods and fens”. This letter never arrived. No doubt the letter carrier could not find the king, or thought the whole situation far too dangerous even to try.

But what would have happened if the letter had been received? Would it have been the last straw for a king already isolated, almost without support from his own subjects and his own Church? A king also with clear precedent for simply retiring to safety? Or would Alfred (as he so often did in reality) have thought of another bold, imaginative and unprecedented step to take?

This story explores that last possibility.

Alfred, Guthrum, Ethelnoth, Odda, Ubbi, Bishop Ceolred, the archbishop of Canterbury, as well as the pope, are all historical characters. The pope's letter is based on examples of his known correspondence.

A dark figure moved under the trees ahead, barely visible through the heavy mist, and King Alfred raised his sword. Behind him the last army of England — all eighteen of them — stirred with unease, weapons ready as well.

“Easy,” Alfred said, lowering his sword and leaning on it wearily. “It is one of the peasants from the village.” He looked down at the man who was now kneeling before him, gazing up at the gold torque and bracelets that marked the king.

“How many are there?”

“Tw-twelve, lord King,” the peasant stammered.

“In the church?”

“Yes, lord King.”

The Vikings were conquerors, not raiders. Guthrum's men always quartered themselves in the timber churches, leaving the peasant huts and the larger thanes' dwellings undamaged — as long as there was no resistance. They meant to take the country over, not destroy it. The mist was rising and the lightless village was visible below.

“What are they doing now?”

As if in reply the church door swung open, a square of red light against the blackness, and struggling figures passed across it before it slammed shut again. A female shriek hung in the air, then was drowned out by a roar of welcome.

Edbert, the king's chaplain, stirred with anger. He was lean, just string and bones, all the fat squeezed out by the passion of his faith. His voice, loud and resonant, had been formed by that same faith.

“They are devils, heathen devils! Even in God’s own house they practise their beastly lusts. Surely He shall strike them in the middle of their sin, and they shall be carried to the houses of lamentation where the worm—”

“Enough, Edbert.”

Alfred knew that his chaplain was vehement against the heathens, striking out strongly enough with his heavy mace, for all his leanness and apparent reluctance to shed blood against the canons of the Church. But talk of miracles could only anger men who had wished for divine assistance many times — so far without reward. He turned back to the peasant. “You’re sure there are twelve?”

“Yes, lord King.”

The odds were not good. He needed a two-to-one advantage to guarantee victory. And Godrich was still coughing, near dead with cold. He was one of the eleven king’s companions who had right of precedence in every battle. But not this time. A sound reason must be concocted for leaving him behind.

“I have a most important duty for you, Godrich. If the attack should fail we will need the horses. Take them all down the track. Guard them with your life. Take Edi to help you. All others follow me.”

Alfred put his hand on the kneeling peasant’s shoulder.

“How will we know the door is unbarred?”

“My wife, lord King...”

“She is in there with the Vikings?”

“Aye, lord King.”

“You have a knife in your belt? Follow, then. I grant you the throats of the wounded, to cut.”

The men surged forward across the meadow, grimly eager now to end the waiting, to strike at least one nest of their enemies from the board.

This night-time raid was a pale shadow of past encounters. Nine times now Alfred had led whole armies, real armies, thousands of men, against the drawn-up line of the enemy. With the war horns bellowing, the men drumming their spears against the hollow shields, the champions in the front rank throwing up their gold-hilted swords and catching them as they called on their ancestors to witness their deeds. And always, always the Viking line had stood watching, unafraid. The horses’ heads on poles grinning over their array, the terrible Raven banner of the sons of Ragnar spreading its wings in triumph.

How bold the attack; how bad the defeat. Only once, at Ashdown, had Alfred made the enemy fall back.

So there would be no triumph in this night encounter, no glory.

But when this band of plunderers vanished, the rest of the invaders would know there was one Saxon king still left in England.

As they pushed through the gap in the thorn hedge and strode into the miserable cluster of wattle-and-daub huts, Alfred jerked his shield down so he could seize the handgrip, and cleared the sax knife in its sheath. In pitched battle he carried long sword and iron-mounted spear, but for these scrimmages among the houses the men of Wessex had gone back to the weapons of their ancestors, the Saxons. The men of the sax: short, pointed, single-edged cleavers. He strode quickly so that the hurrying companions could not squeeze past him. Where was the Viking sentry? When they had reached the last patch of shadow before the churchyard the men stopped at his signal and pushed forward the peasant guide. Alfred looked at him once, and nodded.

“Call now to your woman.”

The peasant drew in his breath, shivering with fear, then ran forward five paces into the little open square before the church. He halted and at the top of his voice uttered the long, wailing ululation of the wolf, the wild wolf of the English forests.

Instantly a harsh voice roared out from the church's tiny belfry, little more than a platform above the roof. A javelin streaked down at the howling man, but he had already leapt aside. There was a scrape of metal as the Saxons drew their weapons. The door swung suddenly outwards; Alfred held his shield in front of him and charged for the center of the door.

Figures pushed furiously in front of him, Tobba on the left, Wighard, captain of the king's guard, on the right. As he burst into the room men were already down, bare-skinned bearded figures rolling in blood. A naked, screeching woman ran across his path, and behind her he saw a Viking jumping for the ax that leaned against the wall. Alfred hurled himself forward and as the Viking turned back he drove the sax in under his chin. When he spun round, shield raised in automatic defence, he realized the skirmish was already over. The English had fanned out in one furious sweep and driven from wall to wall, cutting every Viking down, stabbing savagely at the fallen; no veteran of the Athelney winter thought for an instant of honor, or display. A Viking with his back turned was all they wanted to see.

Even as relief flooded into him Alfred remembered that there was one task left undone. Where was that Viking sentry? He had been on the belfry, awake and armed. He had had no time to come down and fall in the slaughter. Behind the altar there was a staircase leading up, little more than a ladder. Alfred called out in warning to the milling Englishmen and sprang towards it with his shield high. He was too late. Elfstan, his old companion, stared at his king without

comprehension, threw up his arms, and fell forward. The javelin was bedded deep in his spine.

Slowly, deliberately, an armed Viking stepped down the ladder. He was the biggest man Alfred had ever seen, taller even than himself. His biceps swelled above gleaming bracelets, the rivets of his mail shirt straining to contain the bulk inside. Round his neck and waist shone the loot of a plundered continent. Without haste the Viking threw aside his shield and tossed a great poleax from one hand to the other.

His eyes met the king's. He nodded, and pointed the spiked head of the ax at the planked floor.

"Kom. Thou. *Konungrinn*. De king."

*The fight's already won, thought Alfred. Lose my life now? Insane. But can I turn aside from a challenge? I should have the churls with their bows to shoot him down. That is all that any pirate deserves from England.*

The Viking was already halfway down the stair, moving as fast as a cat, not stopping to whirl up the ax but stabbing straight forward with the point. Reflex hurled Alfred's shield up to push the blow aside. But behind it came two hundred and eighty pounds of driving weight. The attacker fought for a neck-break hold, snatching at the sax in Alfred's hand. For a moment all the king could do was struggle to get free. Then he was hurled aside. As he hit the wall there was a clang of metal, a moan. He saw Wighard falling back, his useless right arm trying to cover the rent in his armor.

Tobba stepped forward, his fist a short flashing arc which ended at the Viking's temple. As the giant staggered back towards him Alfred stepped forward and drove his sax with all his strength deep into the enemy's back, twisted furiously, withdrew as the man fell.

Tobba grinned at him and displayed his right fist. Five metal rings encircled the thumb and fingers.

"I 'ad the metalsmith mek it for me," he said.

Alfred stared round the room, trying to take stock. Already the place was crowded, the men of the village pushing in, calling to each other — and to their women, now struggling into their clothes. They gaped down at the gashed and bloody corpses while a furtive figure was already rummaging beneath discarded armor for the loot all plunderers carried with them. Wulfhun saw this and knocked man aside. Wighard was down, obviously on the point of death. The Viking's ax had almost severed his arm and driven far too deep between neck and shoulder. Edbert, again priest not warrior, was bent over him, fussing with a phial, frowning at the mortally wounded man's words. As Alfred watched, the dying man fixed his eyes on his king, spoke haltingly to the chaplain, and then fell back, choking.

The pirate at his feet was moving too, saying something. Alfred's

lifted hand stayed the eager peasant who rushed forward with his knife raised.

"What?" he said.

The pirate spoke again, in the kind of pidgin used by the invaders' captive women and slaves.

"Good stroke were that. I fought in front for fifteen years. Never saw stroke like him."

He fumbled for something round his neck, a charm pendant beneath the massive golden neck ring, concern coming into his eyes till his hand closed over it. He sighed, raised himself.

"But now I go!" he called. "I go. To Thruthvangar!"

Alfred nodded, and the peasant sprang forward.

Three days later the king sat on the camp stool which was all that Athelney could offer for a throne, waiting for the councillors to come to the meeting he had called, still tossing the Viking's mysterious pendant meditatively from hand to hand.

There was no doubt what it was. When he had first pulled it out and shown it to the others, Edbert had said straight away, with a look of horror: "It is the *pudendum hominis*! It is a sign of the beastly lusts of the devil's children, abandoned to original sin! It is the pillar which the heathen worship, so boldly destroyed by our countryman the worthy Boniface in Detmar! It is—"

"It's a prick," said Tobba, putting the matter more simply.

It was a token, the king thought now, closing his fist angrily on it. A token for all the difficulties he continued to face.

He had had two dozen companions when they all set out from Athelney. But as they made their long, circuitous ride across Somerset, first one man had dropped out with horse trouble and then another. In darkness they simply faded away into the dusk; they had had their fill of the endless, losing battles. Noblemen, king's companions, men whose fathers and grandfathers had fought for Christ and Wessex. They would go home quietly to their estates, sit and watch, perhaps send discreet emissaries to the Viking king at Chippenham. Sooner or later one of them would betray the secret of the camp at Athelney, and then Alfred too would wake one night, as he had woken so many Viking stragglers, with shrieks around him and a knife already in his throat.

It would be sooner if they heard he had begun to refuse battle with the heathen. Small as the action had been, that night raid had been important. Eighteen men could still make a difference. But why had those eighteen stayed with him? The companions, no doubt, because they still felt it their duty. The churls, maybe, because they thought the heathens had come to take their land. But how long



would either motivation last against continuous defeat and fear of death? Deep in his bones Alfred knew that there was only one man in his army, only one man in Athelney, who genuinely and without pretence had no fear of any Viking who ever breathed, and that was the grim and silent churl Tobba. No one knew where he came from. He had simply appeared in the camp one dawn, with a Viking ax in his hand and two mail shirts over his gigantic shoulder, saying nothing about where he had got them, or how he had slipped through the sentries round the marsh. He was just there. To kill the invaders. If only the king could find a thousand subjects like him.

Alfred opened his fist and the golden token swung before his eyes, a shining symbol of all that troubled him. First and foremost, he simply could not beat the Vikings in the open field. During the battle-winter eight years before, he and his brother King Ethelred had led the men of Wessex to fight the Vikings' Great Army nine times. Eight times they had been beaten.

The ninth time was at Ashdown...Well, he had gained great credit there, and still had some of it left. While his brother had dallied at the pre-battle mass, Alfred had seen that the Vikings were beginning to move down the hill. When Ethelred refused to curtail the mass and leave early, Alfred had stridden forward on his own, and had led the men of Wessex up the hill himself, charging in the front like a wild boar, or so the poets said. Just that one time his fury and frustration had inspired the men so that in the end the Vikings had yielded, retreated to leave a field full of dead, two heathen kings and five jarls among them. They had been back again two weeks later, as ready to fight as ever.

In some ways that day's battle had resembled the little skirmish so recently fought. Total surprise, with the fight as good as won even as it began. But though the skirmish had been won, there had still been one Viking left, ready to fight on. He had cost Alfred two good men and had come within a hair of ending the campaign forever by killing the last of all the English kings still prepared to resist.

He had died well too. Better than his victim Wighard, Alfred was forced to admit. Very, very reluctantly Edbert had been compelled to reveal what the last words of the king's captain were. He had died saying: "God should have spared me this." How many years in purgatory that would cost him, Edbert had lamented, how little the faith of these degenerate times... Well, the dying Viking had had faith. Faith in something. Maybe that was what made them fight so with such resolution.

It was the English who were not fighting well. That was Alfred's second problem, and he knew exactly what caused it. They expected to lose. Soon after every battle began the first of the wounded would

be begging their friends not to leave them on the field to be dispatched when the English withdrew — as everyone knew they would. And their friends were only too ready to help them back to their ponies. Sometimes those who assisted returned to the front, sometimes they didn't. It was surprising in a way that so many men were still prepared to obey their king's call, to turn out and fight for their lands and their right not to obey foreigners.

But the thanes were beginning to hope that when the end finally came they could make a deal with the invaders, keep their lands, maybe pay higher taxes, bow to foreign kings. They could do what the men of the north, and of the Mark, had done. Five years before Burgred, king of the Mark, had given up, collected his treasury and the crown jewels, and slipped away to Rome. The pony-loads of gold and silver he had taken with him would buy him a handsome estate in the sun for the rest of his life. Alfred knew that some of his followers were already wondering whether it would not be a good plan to depose their king, the last stubborn atheling of the house of Cerdic, and replace him with someone more biddable. There was little chance for him to forget Burgred's treachery. Far too often Alfred's wife Ealhswith reminded him of her kinsman, the former king of the Mark.

She had a son and daughter to think of. But he had a kingdom — reason enough for him to battle on. As for the rest of the English, if they fought badly it was not due to any lack of skill or want of age. It was because they had plenty to lose and almost nothing to gain. Nor had he anything to offer the loyal. No land. It had been twenty years since his pious father had given a whole tenth of all his land in all the kingdom to the Church. Land that ordinarily would have gone to supporting warriors, pensioning off the injured, making the old companions ready and eager to breed sons and send them into service in their turn. Alfred had none now to give.

He hadn't been able to beat the Vikings when he had an army — and now it was impossible to raise one. The Vikings had all but caught him in bed three months before, when every Christian in Wessex was sleeping off the Christmas festivities. He had barely escaped them, fleeing like a thief into the night. Now the Viking king sat in Chippenham and sent his messengers along the high roads. The true king must skulk in the marsh and hope that in the end news of his continued resistance would somehow seep out.

And that took him to the third of his problems. He couldn't beat the Vikings because his men would not support him. He couldn't get his men to support him because their rewards had gone to the Church. And the Church.

The sound of challenges from outside told him that his councillors had arrived and were about to be shown in. Swiftly Alfred gave the

pendant — prick, pudendum or holy sign, whatever it was — one last look and then stuffed it into his belt-bag and forgot about it. He touched the cross that hung from a silver chain about his neck. The cross of the true Christ. Might His power still be with him. The canvas screen of his shelter was pulled aside.

He looked glumly at the seven men who came in, as they slowly and with inappropriate courtesy found places among the motley assortment of seats he could provide. Only one councillor had an unquestioned right to be there. At least two of the others he could much better have spared. But they were all he had to work with.

“I will say who is present, for those who have not met before,” he began. “First, all should know Alderman Ethelnoth.” The rest nodded politely to the red-faced heavy man who sat nearest to the king: the only shire-leader still to be in the field, still fighting from a bivouac like Alfred’s own.

“Next, we have a spokesman from Alderman Odda.” Odda was the shire-leader of Devon. “Wihtbord, what know you of the enemy?”

The young, scarred man spoke briefly and without shyness. “I have heard that Ubbi is in Bristol fitting out a fleet. He has the Raven banner with him. My master, Odda, has called out the shire levy, a thousand men at a time. He is watching the coast.”

This was news — and bad news. Ubbi was one of the dreaded sons of Ragnar. Two of the others were gone. Halfdan had retired to the north, Sigurd Snake-eye was thought to be ravaging in Ireland. And — thank God — no one had heard of Ivar the Boneless for some time. Bad news. Alfred had hoped that he would only have to deal with the relatively weaker King Guthrum. But with Ubbi outfitting a fleet, the Ragnarssons still presented a great danger.

“Representing both Dorset and Hampshire we have Osbert.”

Glum silence greeted this remark. The presence of Osbert reminded them that the true aldermen of these two shires could not or would not come. Everyone knew that the alderman of Hampshire had fled overseas, while the alderman of Dorset had cravenly submitted to the Viking Guthrum, so could not be trusted with knowledge of his king’s whereabouts.

Almost with relief Alfred turned to the three churchmen present.

“Bishop Daniel is here in his own right, to speak for the Church —”

“And also for my lord the archbishop of Canterbury.”

“ — and I have further invited Bishop Ceolred to join us, for wisdom and his experience.”

Eyes turned curiously to the old man, evidently in very poor health, who sat nearest the door. He was in fact the bishop of Leicester, far beyond the borders of Wessex. But Leicester was now a

Viking town, and the bishop had fled to what he thought was safety with the king of Wessex. Perhaps he regretted it now. Still, Alfred thought, he might at least get some sense through to this overbearing idiot Daniel and his lord of Canterbury.

"Finally Edbert my chaplain is here to make note of all decisions reached. And Wulfsige is present as captain of my guard."

Alfred looked around at his handful of followers and kept a stern face so his black depression would not show. "Nobles, I have to tell you this. There will be a battle. I am calling the muster of Wessex for Ascension Day. It will be at Edgebright's Stone, east of Selwood. Every man of Wessex must be there or forfeit all land-right and kin-right forever."

There were slow nods. Every Christian knew when Easter was, if he knew nothing else. It had been ten days ago. In thirty more days would be Ascension. Everyone knew Edgebright's Stone. And it was far enough away from the Viking center at Chippenham to make a muster possible.

"Bishop Daniel, I rely on you to pass this message to every priest in your diocese and in the archdiocese of your lord, so that they can tell every Christian in every parish."

"How am I to do that, my lord? I have no hundreds of horsemen."

"Write, then. Make a hundred writs. Send riders on circuits."

Edbert coughed apologetically. "Lord king, not all priests may be able to read. True they are pious men, worthy men, but—"

"They read and write quick enough when it comes to snatching land by charter!" Wulfsige's snarl was echoed by all the laymen.

Alfred silenced them with a sharp motion. "Send the messages, Bishop Daniel. Another day we will take up the question of whether priests who cannot read should be priests or not. The day of the muster is fixed, and I will be there, even if none of the rest of Wessex follows me. But I trust my subjects' loyalty. We will have an army to fight the heathens. What I need to know is, how can I be sure of victory — this time?"

There was a long silence, while most of the men present stared at the floor. Alderman Ethelnoth slowly shook his head from side to side. No one could doubt his courage, but he had been at a lot of lost battles too. Only Daniel the bishop kept his head firmly erect. Finally, and with an impatient frown, he spoke.

"It is not for a servant of the Lord to give advice on secular matters — while laymen sit silent. But is it not clear that the issue of all battles is in the hands of God? If we do our part, he will do his, and will succor us as he did Moses and the Israelites from Pharaoh, or the people of Bethulia from the Assyrians. Let us have faith, and make the muster, trusting not in the feeble strength of mortal men."

"We've had faith many times before," remarked Ethelnoth. "It's done us no good any time. Except at Ashdown. And it wouldn't have done then if the king had waited for the end of mass."

"Then that victory is the result of sin!" The bishop sat up straighter on his canvas stool and glared round him. "It is the sins of this country which have exposed us to what we now suffer! I had not thought to speak of this, but you force it on me. The sin is in this very room!"

"Who do you mean?" asked Wulfsige.

"I mean the highest. I mean the king. Deny it, lord, if you dare. But have you not again and again imposed on the rights of my true lord the archbishop? Have you not burdened his minsters with calls for tribute, for bridge money and fort money? And when the abbots, as was right and proper, refused to consent to these demands, relying on the charters given to their ancestors for ever, have you not given the land to others, and sent your officers to seize church property by violence? Where are your endowments to the Church? And how have you tried to expiate the wrong your brother did, marrying his father's widow in defiance of the laws of the Church and the word of the Holy Father himself? And what of the noble abbot Wulfred—"

"Enough, enough," Alfred broke in. "As for my brother's incest, that is between him and God. You anger me greatly with these charges. There have been no seizures by violence, except where my officers have been attacked. Wulfred brought his own troubles on himself. And as for the fort tax and the bridge tax, lord bishop, the money is to fight the heathens! Is that not a suitable object for the wealth of the Church? I know the charters except Church lands from such tolls, but they were drawn up before ever a heathen pirate set foot in England. Is it not better to give the money to me than to be pillaged by Guthrum?"

"Secular matters are not my concern," Daniel muttered.

"Is that so? Then why should my men protect you from the Vikings?"

"Because it is your duty to keep safe the kingdom committed to you by the Lord — if you wish afterwards to receive the life of the eternal kingdom."

"And what is your duty?"

"My duty is to see that the rights of the Church are not diminished or infringed in any way, no matter what Herod or Pilate —"

"Lords, lords!" It was Bishop Ceolred who broke in, his voice so frail and weak that all stared at him with alarm. "I beg you, lord Bishop. Think only what may come. You have not seen a Viking sack — I have. After that horror there are no rights for the Church, or for

any of God's poor. They killed my confessor with ox bones. That dear brave man, he changed robes with me, died in my place. And me they sent out as you see now." He laid a thumbless, swollen hand on his lap. "They said I would write no more lying papers. I beg you, lords, come to an agreement."

"I cannot give away my lord archbishop's rights," said Daniel.

For some time Alfred had been aware of growing commotion in the camp outside. It did not sound alarmed — rather more joyful and excited. The canvas screen was lifted, and the massive figure of Tobba appeared in the gap, the gold ring glinting round his neck, given by the king as his personal share of the spoil three days before.

"It's an errand rider, lord. From Rome. From the pope."

"A sign!" cried Edbert. "A token from God. Even as the dove returned to Noah with olive in its beak, so peace has come to our dissensions."

The young man who entered seemed no dove. His olive skin was drawn with fatigue, his well-cut garments dusty and stained from the road. He stared around him with incomprehension, looking at the roughly dressed men, the rude quarters.

"Your pardon, gentlemen, lords? I am looking, seeking the king of English. Alfredo, king of English. One of great trust, told me here to seek..."

His befuddlement was obvious. Alfred controlled his anger and spoke quietly. "I am he."

The young man looked about rather obviously for a clean patch of earth to kneel on, found only mud, and with a suppressed sigh knelt and handed over a document. It was a vellum roll, a heavy wax seal dangling from it.

As Alfred unscrolled it gold leaf glinted between the carefully scribed rows of purple ink. The king held it for a moment, not knowing what to think. Could this be his salvation! He remembered the marble buildings and great power. He had been to Rome himself, twice, had viewed the grandeur of the Holy See. But that had been many years ago, before his life shut down to a blur of rain and blood, days in the saddle, nights planning and conferring. Now the Holy See had come to him.

He passed the document to Edbert. "Read it to us all."

Edbert handled the document reverently, and spoke in a hushed voice. "It is written in Latin, my lord. Illuminated by scribes — and signed by His Holiness himself. It says... it says. 'To Alfred, king of the English. Know, lord King, that we have heard of your travels. ' no, that is trials. and as you, being placed in the life of this world, daily sustain certain hardships, so in like measure do we, and we not only weep for our own — but also sorrow with you, *condolens*, having

sympathy' — no, no — 'suffering alas, jointly with you.'"

Osbert muttered angrily. "Are there Vikings in Rome too?" He turned away from Bishop Daniel's furious glare. Edbert read on.

"But for all our joint sufferings, we exhort and warn you, King, that you should not do as a foolish worldling would do, and think only of the troubles of this present time. Remember that the blessed God will not suffer you to be tempted or, or *probare*, to prove.' No — 'will not suffer you to be tempted or tried above that of which you are able, but will give you the strength to bear any of the trials which in His wisdom He has set upon you. Above all you should strive with willing heart to protect the priests, the men, and the women of the Church.'"

"That's exactly what we are all doing," grunted Ethelnoth.

"But know, O King, that we have heard from our most reverend and holy brother, the archbishop of the race of the English who takes his See in Canterbury, that in your folly you have oppressed upon his rights and privileges as a father of those committed to his care. Now, of all sins, the sin of *avaritia*, of greed is most foul and repellent among the rulers and protectors of the Christian peoples, most abominable and dangerous to the soul. We do most solemnly therefore advise, exhort, and command by this letter from our apostolic dignity that you do now cease and desist from all oppressions against the Church, and do restore to its rulers all those privileges and rights especially in the matter of peaceful and untroubled and taxless possession of the Church's lands, which were granted to them by your ancestors, as we have heard the most godly kings of the English race, and even by your contemporaries, such as the most pious and worthy gentleman. ' The scribe has written the name Bulcredo, my lord, but he must mean—"

"He means that runaway bastard Burgred," snarled the scarred man, Wihtbord.

"Indeed that must be it. ' Burgred, who now lives with us in our Holy See, in peace and in honor. So we exhort you to show honor to your priests, bishops, and archbishop, as you wish to have our friendship in this life and salvation in the life to come.'"

"It is the truth, God's truth!" Daniel cried aloud. "Spoken from the throne of God on earth. Just what I said before the message came. If we fulfil our spiritual duties, our temporal difficulties will disappear. Listen to His Holiness, my king. Restore the rights of the Church. When you do this the Vikings will be destroyed and dispersed by hand of God."

Anger clouded Alfred's face — but before he could speak Edbert hurried on.

"There's another paragraph. " He looked up from the paper to his master with a face of woe.

“What does it say?”

“Well, it says, it says — ‘We have heard with great displeasure that our previous orders have not been obeyed. That in spite of the opinion of the apostolic See, the clerics of England have not yet unitarily given up the lay habit, and do not clothe themselves in tunics after the Roman fashion, reaching chastely to the ankle.’ And then he says, well he goes on, that if this vile habit is given up and we all dress as he does, then God will love us and our afflictions will vanish like snow.”

A bark of laughter came from the red-faced Ethelnoth. “So that’s what’s been causing our troubles! If the priestlings all hide their knees Guthrum will be terrified and run right back to Denmark!” He spat, forcefully, on the puddled floor. The pope’s messenger drew back, not following the quick talk — but knowing that something was very wrong.

“You have no awareness of spirituality, lord Alderman,” said Daniel, the archbishop of Canterbury’s representative, pulling on his riding gloves with an air of finality, eyeing both his own long robe and Edbert’s short-cut tunic and breeches. “We were asking for a message to guide us, and one has come. We must take the advice and the instruction of our father in God. I regard that as settled. There is one other matter, lord King, trivial in itself, but which I see as a trial of your good intentions and sincerity. That man, that man who came in with the message, with the gold ring round his neck. He is a runaway slave from one of my own manors. I recognize him. I must have him back.”

“Tobba?” barked Wulfsgie. “You can’t have him. He may be a churl, he may even have been a slave, but he’s accepted now. He’s accepted by the companions. The king gave him that gold ring himself.”

“Enough of this,” Alfred said wearily. “I’ll buy him from you.”

“That will not do. I must have him back in person. We have had too many runaways recently—”

“I know that — and I know that they’re running to the Vikings,” shouted Alfred, goaded at last out of politeness. “But this man ran to his king, to fight the invaders of England. You can’t—”

“I must have him back,” ground on Daniel. “I shall make an example of him. The law says that if a slave cannot make restitution to his master then he shall pay for it with his hide. And he cannot make restitution to the Church for his own worth—”

“He has a gold ring worth ten slaves!”

“But since that is his possession, and he is my possession, it is my possession too. And he has also committed sacrilege, in removing himself from the ownership of the Church.”



“So what are you going to do?”

“The penalty for church-breach is flaying, and I shall flay him. Not fatally. My men are most expert. But all who see his back in future will know that the arm of the Church is long. He must be delivered to my tent before sunrise. And mark this, King.” Daniel turned back from the door. “If you persist in holding him, and in your other errors, there will be no passing of your messages. You will come to Edgebright’s Stone, and find it as bare of men as a nunnery’s privy!”

He turned and swept through the makeshift door. In the silence that followed all eyes were on Alfred. He avoided their gaze, rose and took up his long sword and strode from the room, his face set and unreadable. Wulfsige scrambled to his feet too late to bar the way.

“Where are you going?” called Edbert after him.

“Lord King, let me come with you,” Wulfsige bellowed. “Guards!”

Behind, in the shelter, Osbert muttered to Ethelnoth and the others, “What’s he doing? Will he do what that bastard Burgred did? Is this the end? If so, it’s time we all made our peace with Guthrum—”

“I can’t say,” said the alderman. “But if that fool of a bishop, and of a pope, make him give up between them, then that is the end of England, now and forever.”

Alfred strode through the encampment, none daring to obstruct or challenge him, and out into the wet, dripping forest and marshland along the line of the flooded river Tone. But he was not walking completely at random. The thought had been growing on him for weeks that there might come a time when he had to be away from men, from the crowds of faces looking to him for advice and orders, even from the silent pressure of his disapproving wife and coughing, fearful children at her skirts.

He knew now where he was going. To the charcoal burners. They had huts scattered all through the forests, coming out only when they needed to sell their wares, and then returning immediately to the thickets. Even in peacetime kings’ officers did not bother them much. People said that they carried out strange rituals and spoke an ancient tongue among themselves. Alfred had been careful to mark one encampment down when he stumbled on it in the course of one of the hunting expeditions he and his men carried out for food, before they had begun simply to levy toll on the peasants round about. He headed straight for it through the winter dusk.

It was dark by the time he reached the first of the huts. The large man in the doorway looked at him with grave suspicion and lifted his ax.

“I wish to stay here. I will pay for my lodging.”

He was taken in without fuss, or indeed recognition, when he showed them that he had both silver pennies and a long sword at his

side to resist secret murder. The man looked oddly enough at the king's-head pennies when they were offered, as if wondering how long they would be tender. But the silver was good, and that was enough. No doubt they thought he was another runaway thane, deserting his allegiance, but not yet ready to go home or to approach the Vikings' court and sue for amnesty.

On the evening of the next day, the king sat in warm, homely darkness, lit only by the glow of red coals. He was alone in the hut, while the few men and women of the camp busied themselves with the complex operations of their trade. The wife had slung a griddle over the low fire and put raw griddle cakes on it, telling him in her thick accent to watch them and turn them as they cooked. He sat, listening to the crackle of the fire and smelling the pleasant mix of smoke and warm bread. For the first time for many months, the king was at peace. It was a moment taken out of time, a moment when all the pressures outside balanced each other and canceled out.

Whatever happened now, Alfred thought comfortably and lazily, would be decisive. Should he fight? Should he give up and go to Rome? He no longer knew the answers. There was a numbness within where before a fire had burned. He looked up but felt no surprise when the door scraped quietly, and through it came the massive head and shoulders of the grim churl Tobba. He was no longer wearing his gold ring, but trailed his Viking ax at his side. Stooping beneath the low roof, he came over to the fire and sat down on his haunches opposite the king. For a while neither man spoke.

"How did you find me?" asked Alfred at last.

"Asked around. Got a lot of friends in these woods. Quiet people. Don't talk much unless you knows 'em."

They sat a while longer. Absently, Tobba reached out and began to turn the cakes in his thick fingers, dropping them back on to the hot plate with faint hisses of steam.

"Got some news for you," he offered.

"What?"

"Messenger come in from Alderman Odda the morning after you left. Ubbi Ragnarsson attacked. Took his fleet down channel, landed, chased off Odda and his levy. Reckoned they was only peasants, since they only 'ad clubs and pitchforks. Chased 'em into a hill forest by the beach, bottled 'em up, reckoned that was it. That was a mistake. Come midnight, pouring rain, Odda bust out with all his men. Clubs and pitchforks they do all right in the dark. Killed Ubbi, lot of his men, took the Raven banner."

Alfred felt a reluctant stir of interest, an emotion that penetrated the numbness that possessed him. But he still did not speak, only sighed as he stared into the fire. Tobba tried to catch his interest.

“The Raven banner, you know, it really does flap its wings when the Vikings are going to win, and droops them when they’re going to lose.” He grinned. “Messenger said there were some kind of arrangement on the back so you could control it. Odda’s sending it to you. Token of respect. Maybe you can use it in the next battle.”

“If there is a next battle.” The words spoken with great reluctance.

“I got an idea about that.” Tobba turned a few more cakes, as if suddenly embarrassed. “If you don’t mind hearing one from a churl, that is, well, really, a slave...”

Alfred shook his head glumly. “You will be no slave, Tobba. If I leave, you come with me. I can do at least that. I will not hand you back to Daniel and his torturers.”

“No, lord, I think you should hand me over — or the messengers won’t go out and there will be no army for you. But that will only be the start of it. I escaped before — can do it again. And there is something then that I could do. ”

For several minutes the churl spoke on, low-voiced, clumsy, not used to ordering his thoughts and speaking in this manner. But he would not be stopped. Finally the two men sat other, both in different ways awed by what they had come to.

“I think it could work,” said Alfred. “But you know what he’s going to do to you before you escape?”

“Won’t be much worse than what I’ve had to put up with all my life.”

Alfred paused one more moment. “You know, Tobba, you could just run to the Vikings. If you took them my head they’d make you a jarl in any county you wanted. Why are you on my side?”

Tobba hung his head. “To tell. words, they don’t come easy. I been, my whole life, a slave, but my father, you know, he wasn’t, and maybe my kids won’t be, if I ever have any.” His voice dropped to a mutter. “I don’t see why they should grow up talking Danish. My dad didn’t, nor my grandad. That’s all I care about.”

The door scraped again, and the burner’s woman looked in, face sharp with suspicion. “Ave you two forgotten them cakes? If you’ve burned them there’ll be no dinner for none of us!”

Tobba looked up, grinning. “No fear of that, missis. You got two good cooks ‘ere. We been cooking up a storm. ‘Ere—” He scooped a cake deftly off the plate and popped it hot and whole into his cavernous mouth. “Done to a turn,” he announced, blowing crumbs. “I reckon them’s the best bloody cakes ever been baked in England.”

It was a reluctant army that gathered at Edgebright’s Stone. A smaller army than Alfred had ever led before. Before it grew even

smaller word arrived that the Vikings were gathering their own at Eddington. Alfred was determined to attack before the odds became even worse.

The Vikings had left their camp in the forest soon after dawn and were drawn up in the fields close by. Their berserkers, the fiercest fighters of all, were shouting curses at the enemy as they worked themselves into a rage of battle madness. But the English soldiers stood firm despite the steady rain that soaked their chain mail, and dripped from their helmets' rims. They stirred and gripped their weapons when the wail of the lurhorns was carried by the damp air.

"They attack," said Wulfsige, standing at his king's right hand.

"Stand firm!" Alfred shouted above the thunder of running feet, the first crash of metal against metal as the lines met.

The English fought well, hacking at the linden shields of their enemies, holding their own. Men were wounded, dropped to their knees, fought on stabbing upwards under the pirates' guards. While, from behind the fighting ranks, half-armed churls staggered up with the biggest boulders they could lift, and lobbed them over their companions to crash down on the attackers. There were cries of pain and rage as the stones dislodged helmets, broke collarbones, and fell to the ground to perhaps provide a tripping block for a straining foot.

Alfred stabbed out with his sword and felt it sink deep. But at the same time he saw that his lines were being forced back in the center. "Now!" he called out to Wulfsige. "Give them the signal."

The enemy front rank shuddered and almost fell back when willing hands lifted the captured Raven banner high beside the Golden Wagon of Wessex. Now there was no flapping of jet wings to urge on the Vikings. Instead the Raven's head was down, the wings drooped in death, stitched red drops of blood dripping down from each eye.

But the line held, fought back, pushed forward once again. While to their rear the berserkers gathered, foaming with rage and chewing the edges of their shields with passion. When they attacked together none could stand before them.

At this moment Alfred saw what his opponents could not see yet and he shouted aloud. Behind the enemy, bursting out from between the trees, came a motley, skin-draped horde. They were waving clubs, crude logs of firewood, tent poles, iron pokers, tools, and weapons of any kind. They fell on the Viking rear like a great crashing wave, striking down and destroying.

For the first and only time in his life Alfred saw a heathen berserker's expression change from inhuman fury to amazement and then to plain uncomplicated fear.

Within a minute the battle was over as the Vikings, attacked from back and front, broke lines, tried to flee, and were struck down. Alfred

had to force his way through his own men and their dancing half-human helpers to throw a shield over Guthrum as he was driven to the ground, to save his life and accept his surrender.

That night was a night of feasting. Magnanimous in victory, Alfred sat the defeated Viking king Guthrum at his side. He was silent for the most part, drinking deeply and heavily of the mead and ale.

"We had you beaten, you know," Guthrum finally growled. They were at that stage of the banquet when the politenesses have all been said, and men are free to talk openly. The kings' neighbors on either side, Ethelnoth, Bishop Ceolred, Alderman Odda, and a Viking jarl, had ceased to listen to their leaders and were talking among selves.

Alfred leaned over the table and hooked away the Viking's wine cup.

"If you'd like me to stop feasting and carry on fighting, that's all right by me. Let's see, you must have three-or fourscore men of your army still alive. And as soon as the others know it's safe to surrender they will all come in. When would you like to begin this battle?"

"All right, all right." Guthrum retrieved his wine cup, grinning sourly. He had been in England thirteen years and had long since dispensed with interpreters. "You won, fair enough. I'm just saying that in the battle, in the real battle, we had you beat. Your centre caving in. I could see you standing in the middle, trying to rally them. When your line broke I was going to send a hundred berserkers right down the middle, to get you. I reckoned we'd let you get away once too often already."

"Maybe." After the total victory Alfred could afford to be generous. But in spite of his experiences of losing battles, he thought this time Guthrum was wrong. It was true that the Viking hard core of veteran professionals had forced his men back in the center, but the English thanes had been standing well, with none of the dribble to the rear he had come to expect. Though their line was bent, they were still holding together.

Not that it mattered anyway who would have won. He still remembered and savored the moment when the ragged, badly armed men had fallen on the Viking rear.

"How did you get them to do it?" asked Guthrum, his voice low and confidential.

"It was a simple idea brought to me by a simple man. Your warriors are lazy. Every one of them has to have at least one English slave to cook for him and clean his gear, if not another to cut fodder for the ponies and help to look after the loot. You've had no trouble getting servants, because they have plenty to run away from. All I did was to get a message to them — a message from someone they could see was one of their own and not interested in lying to them. It was

his idea to rally them. It was I who told him how it could be done.”

“I know the one who did this, who came just a few days ago. They called me over to look at his back when he came in. Very skilful job. Everyone was talking about it. Even startled me. But what message could he bring that could unite these creatures?”

“A promise — my promise. I gave my word that every runaway slave in your camp would be pardoned, would have his freedom, and would receive two oxgangs of land in exchange for every Viking head.”

“An oxgang? Why that must be one, or more, of what we call acres. Yes, I suppose a man could live on that. I can see the wisdom of this promise. But where did you get the land from?” He lowered his voice again, looking around out of the corners of his eyes. “Or was it just a lie? All know that you have no land or treasure. You have nothing left to give. Certainly not enough for all who fought today. What are you going to need? Four thousand acres? If you’re going to promise them land in my kingdom, I can guarantee they’ll have to fight for every inch of it.”

Alfred frowned grimly. “I am taking it from Church estates. I have no other choice. I cannot go on doing battle with both Vikings and Church. So I defeat one — and beg mercy from the other. I firmly believe that the land granted by my ancestors was necessarily provisional, and that I have the right to reclaim it. I am breaking up several estates of the Church, and will grant them to these my new tenants. I may have to levy extra taxes to set them up with stock and gear — but at least I can count on future loyalty.”

“From the slaves, perhaps. What of your bishops and priests? What of the pope? He will put your whole country under the ban.”

Guthrum was well informed for a heathen and a pirate, thought Alfred. But perhaps now was the time to make the proposal.

“I mean to talk to you about that. I think I will have less trouble from the pope if I can explain to him that by taking a little land from a few minsters I have gained for Christ a whole new nation. And, you know, we cannot go on living on the same island and sharing no belief at all. This time I have sworn oaths on holy relics and you on the arm-ring of Thor, but why should we not all in future swear on the same things?

“This is my offer. I want you and your men to be baptized. If you agree I myself will be your sponsor, and your godfather. Godfathers are sworn to support their spiritual children if they come into conflict later on.” Alfred eyed Guthrum steadily as he said the last words. Guthrum, he knew, would have difficulty establishing himself after this shattering defeat. He would need allies.

The Viking only laughed. He reached across the table and

suddenly tapped the thong wrapped around Alfred's right wrist, touching the Viking pendant he had taken to wearing.

"Why are you wearing this, King? I know where you got it from. As soon as Rani disappeared I knew you had something to do with it. No one else could have bested him. Now let me make you an offer in return. Already you have made bitter enemies in the Church. The black robes will never forgive you now, no matter what you do. They are arrogant always and think only they have wisdom, only they can say where a man will go once he is dead. But we know better! No man, and no god, holds all the truth. I say, let the gods contest with each other and see who keeps his worshippers best. Let all men choose freely — between gods who reward the brave and the daring, and this god of the weak and timid. Let them choose between priests who ask for nothing — and priests who send innocent children to hell forever if their fathers cannot pay for baptism. Choose between gods who punish sinners, and a god who says all are sinners, so there is no reward for virtue."

He dropped his voice suddenly, in what had become an attentive silence. "Between a god who asks for tithes on the unborn calf, and our way, which is free. I make you a counterproposal, King Alfred, king of the English. Leave your Church be. But let our priests talk freely and go where they will. And we will do the same for your priests. And then let every man and every woman believe what they will, and pay what they will. If the Christians' God is all-powerful, as they say, he will win the contest. If he is not..."

Guthrum shrugged. Alfred looked round at his nearest councillors, all of them staring at Guthrum with consideration in their eyes.

"If Bishop Daniel were here he would damn us all to hell for listening," remarked Ethelnoth, draining his wine cup.

"But Daniel has gone to Canterbury to whine and complain to the archbishop," observed Odda.

"It is our own doing," quavered Bishop Ceolred. "Did I not beg Daniel to show moderation? But he had no wisdom. You all know that I have lost from the Vikings as much as any and I have been a faithful follower of the Lord Jesus all my life. Yet, I say to you, maybe no man has the right to forbid another his share of the wisdom in the world. After all that we have suffered. who can forbid the king his will in this matter?"

"There is one thing that troubles me," said Alfred. Once more he had the heathen pendant in his hand, and was swinging it thoughtfully. "When our two armies met, mine fought for Christ and yours for the old gods. Yet mine won. Does that not show that Christ and his father are the stronger?"

Guthrum laughed explosively. "Is that what you thought all the

times you lost? No.” He pulled suddenly at the pendant he wore round his own neck, undid the fastening, and handed it across the table to the king. “What that victory shows is that you are a true leader. Put down Rani’s pendant and take mine. He worshipped Freyr, a good god for a warrior and stallion, like Rani was. May he live in Thruthvangar, in the plains of pleasure, forever. But for kings like you and me, the true god is Odin, the father of the slain, the god of justice, the god who can say two meanings at once. Here, take this.”

Again he held forward the silver medal. On it was Gungnir, the sacred spear of Odin. Alfred reached out and touched it, pushed it about on the table — then touched his chest.

“No. It is the cross of the Christ that I wear here. I have always sworn it.”

“Wear it still,” Guthrum said. “Wear them both until you decide.”

All movement round the tables stilled, the very cupbearers and carvers stopping in their tracks to gape at the king. Alfred’s eyes, sweeping along the row of faces turned to his, fell suddenly on the anguished gaze of his chaplain Edbert.

In that moment he knew the future. If men were given the free choice Guthrum offered, then all the passion, the faith, the loyalty of Edbert and his like would be of no avail. The bitter, grasping selfishness of the archbishops, the popes, the Daniels, would cancel it every time. With his mind’s eye he saw the great minsters deserted, their stone carted away to use in barns and walls. He saw armies gathering on the white cliffs of England, armies of Saxons and Vikings united under the banners of Odin and Thor, ready to spread their faith to the Franks and the southerners. He saw the White Christ himself, a baby, crying forsaken on the last untended altar of Rome.

If he wavered now, Christianity would not stand.

In the tense silence Tobba leaned forward from his place behind King Alfred’s chair.

He took the chain in his hand and clasped it round his master’s neck. There was the tiniest sound in the silent room as metal touched metal.

Or was it the loudest sound any of them had ever heard?